

THE Book Collector

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SUMMER 2023



A NMCT grant enabled this conservation intern to treat pre-1700 English and Italian musical manuscripts from Christ Church Library. Courtesy of the Governing Body of Christ Church and © Oxford Conservation Consortium.

Rescuing the past and caring for the future

The National Manuscripts Conservation Trust

DAVID MCKITTERICK

The National Manuscripts Conservation Trust (NMCT) exists to do just that: the conservation of manuscripts, of all kinds and dates, now in this country's collections. It works with libraries, museums, record offices, institutional archives and other bodies entrusted with such materials. Besides these, help is given to owners of manuscript material which is conditionally exempt from capital taxation or is owned by a charitable trust. Because other arrangements exist for them, it is not concerned with national resources such as the British Library or the National Libraries of Wales and Scotland, though it keeps in close contact with the skills and knowledge available there.

Founded in 1990, its origins lie in the 1980s. A survey in 1985 by the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts revealed the parlous state of many of the country's archives. The Commission's annual report for 1985–6 remarked on how little support was available to libraries and record offices towards the cost of conserving manuscript material in comparison with the resources available in other heritage fields. While the British Library administered a small number of grants from the Wolfson Trust for the conservation of manuscripts, much further action was needed.

Several issues further complicated the situation, including inadequate, damp, infested and poorly ventilated buildings, a lack of trained archivists, a lack of trained conservators, indifference by those responsible for funding, competition for funding other needs, a lack of catalogues, lack of public access where it should be straightforward, and a lack of long-term commitment as opposed to short-term first aid. The Commission's report in 1990 was frank: 'the number of documents requiring treatment is immeasurable'.

The challenges were to be found in all kinds of repositories. In

the absence of legal obligations for local authorities to care for most archives in their care, they were often at or near the bottom of lists of priorities. From university libraries to small museums and societies, many owners simply did not have the necessary resources. The poor condition of manuscripts of all kinds, medieval or modern, meant that they could not be safely produced for consultation or public enjoyment.

The challenges to the new NMCT, launched at the British Library on 23 November 1989, were thus considerable. The Trust was founded to tackle some of them, working within existing arrangements and seeking to amend matters where possible. In 1989, Richard Luce, Minister for the Arts, announced that £100,000 would be set aside annually towards a fund that would assist owners, provided that matched funding was found from private resources. The model was akin to the arrangement with the Wolfson Trust, which had for some years worked with the British Library to meet some of the costs of conservation and purchase of important books by other libraries: by 1990 the Wolfson Trust had provided £1.75 million for this purpose.

Three trustees were appointed: one by the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, one by the British Library, and one representing private donors. They were respectively John Ehrman (chairman), Henry Heaney (Librarian of Glasgow University) and Lewis Golden. The first two were succeeded shortly afterwards by Lord Egremont and Bernard Naylor (Librarian of Southampton University). For the first few years their Secretary in the British Library was Stephanie Kenna. Her successor today is Nell Hoare, whose contact details are provided below.

The British Library Board agreed to meet the costs of establishing the new NMCT, and to administer it for an initial period of three years at no charge. Thus experience gained in administering other grants could be shared, by an arrangement that called on half the time of a professional member of staff. An appeal was launched to private individuals and to institutional bodies, and the accounts for the first year record a total of £147,234 in donations. Benefactors included Cambridge and Oxford colleges, city livery companies, the book trade, a handful of local authorities and several major

charitable trusts, besides private individuals: in all, the first annual report listed forty-five institutional donors.

In that opening year, the Trust supported thirteen collections, the range giving an inkling of how grants were to be distributed in times to come. Major grants, each spread over three years, went to Southampton University Library towards the papers of the first Duke of Wellington relating to the Peninsular War, and to Yorkshire Archaeological Society towards the conservation of the court rolls of the manor of Wakefield – an area covering much of West Yorkshire. A further grant over three years went to York Minster for the papers of a 17th-century antiquary, and one over two years went to Lambeth Palace Library for the records of the Court of Arches and the Prerogative Court of Canterbury. Elsewhere in London, money was allotted to Sion College, the Royal Society and the British Architectural Library. Further funds were allocated to the Cambridge Colleges Library Conservation Consortium for the plans by William Wilkins for Downing College. Four grants went to Scotland: to the University of St Andrews to repair papers from the architectural practice of James Gillespie & Scott, to collections relating to the Burghs of Selkirk and of Auchtermuchty and to estate papers bearing on the Borough of Coatbridge. Early case summary papers of the Children's Society, records of immense personal importance, were the first involving several organisations concerned with social and family history.

Already there was a pattern. Apart from the requirement that applicants should contribute normally not less than 50 percent of the estimated costs, the trustees were balancing available funds, and committing to the future in what seemed to be realistic timetables for the speed of repairs, these always depending on the availability of skilled staff.

The initial pump-priming grants from the Exchequer came to an end in March 1999. Henceforth, the Trust itself was responsible for fundraising, and it continued its appeal at that time to try to increase the endowment to £2.5 million. The income from this would be modest when measured against the need to finance essential conservation work across the country. Vitaly, the Pilgrim Trust had supported the NMCT from the beginning, and continues to do

so, making use of the skills and personal connections developed by the NMCT. This has proved a practical and efficient mechanism. Between 2011 and 2021 the Trust helped fund a total of sixty-eight projects, while its funding helped leverage over £650,000 from other sources. By 1998 the overall list of donors among charitable trusts, institutions, corporations and other private groups had swelled to well over a hundred. It included family history societies and local history groups as well as much wealthier bodies, all confirming their support for what had proved to be a thoroughly practical approach to a problem identified a decade earlier. This mixture of trust and private support demonstrated an old truth: that support from different sources can leverage and encourage support from yet others. Whether in fundraising or in the planning and execution of conservation projects, a very great deal depends on cooperation and mutual support.

Such donors have been generous, but so too have various other bodies and individuals. In particular, apart from the continuing support of the Pilgrim Trust, the NMCT has been able regularly to call on expert advice from the National Archives. Museums, Archives and Libraries Wales (MALD) has for some years provided resources for Welsh projects, and more recently the Scottish Council on Archives has worked on Scottish proposals, securing money from the National Records of Scotland.

Increasingly, the Trustees have sought not only to award grants to meet needs and to make original materials available to the wider public, but also to encourage applicants to address ways in which work could serve to train people for the future – sometimes in quite minor matters, sometimes to fully professional standards. As always, it was a question of balance. By the end of the 1990s there were general courses for archive training in Liverpool, London, Bangor, Aberystwyth and the University of Northumbria – none in Scotland. But archives were only one part of the challenge, which includes medieval manuscripts. While a few places, notably a handful of university libraries, possess in-house skills for practical work, there was, and there remains, a continuing skills shortage. Practical courses in book and manuscript conservation at West Dean and at Camberwell cannot, by themselves, fill all needs. Both are heavily

subscribed, and there is a continuing demand for shorter, less formal, training. The University of Northumbria concentrates on paper conservation. With a long history of private conservation practice and training, exemplified in the work of the late S. M. Cockerell, the profession remains defined by a mixture of private and institutional employment, and good private skills are not always easy to match to the work required by those seeking grants. Timetables are full, and people with appropriate practical experience are also much in demand in assessing what needs to be done. Time and again, well-meaning repairs carried out in the even quite recent past have proved to be damaging; no-one wishes to see this repeated. The history of conservation, whether of paintings, sculpture or books and manuscripts, is littered with well-known disasters. If anything, the challenge for manuscripts has increased in the last few years, making the need for training opportunities and supervised practical experience all the more pressing.

Those immediately responsible for archives and manuscripts are by no means always to blame. The disparities between local archive services and the unevenness in investment were emphasised by the then Secretary of State for National Heritage, Peter Brooke, in launching a report by the Historical Manuscripts Commission in 1992. Subsequent local government reorganisation, and changes in local government construction, have exacerbated matters, and the Commission's report for 1991–99 drew attention to the widening gulf between the best- and worst-resourced repositories. In efforts to keep up appearances, resources were increasingly directed to front of house services at the expense of matters such as cataloguing, surveys and conservation.

Yet all is not to lament. The NMCT has always received applications from collections of all kinds, whether local archives, university libraries, companies or societies and private institutions. It is heart-warming to see the range of applications, many clearly the result of the work of dedicated individuals. It is also clear that many authorities take their responsibilities very seriously, seeking support and ensuring that resources are put to productive use. New buildings have been completed. It would be wrong to claim that the story is entirely one of gloom. From some of this country's very largest

libraries down to small groups of local enthusiasts, there emerges a picture that confirms the central importance of, and public interest in, this country's manuscript record.

Applications are always to be encouraged. They need not be vastly ambitious, measured by years rather than months, though this is not infrequent. Many of the Trust's grants have been quite small and aimed at being set beside money raised locally. Some have been for simple basic housing to replace worn or acidic materials, or even to create suitable housing for the first time, replacing aged packaging. At the other end of the spectrum, grants have contributed to the costs of conservation of the 12th-century Winchester Bible, one of the greatest medieval works of art in this country, and the 14th-century Sephardi Haggadah in the John Rylands Library, now also fully visible in a digital form. Naturally, what can be faced depends on what skills are available. The repair of papyrus or Persian illuminated manuscripts demands skills quite different from those for 19th- or 20th-century archives on acidic paper. Often, volunteer work can be invaluable, always provided it is adequately taught and supervised.

There seems to be no limit to the variety of work needing to be done. From the first, architectural drawings have featured regularly, from the 17th-century collection of George Clarke (1661–1736) at Worcester College, Oxford to the work of several 20th-century firms, besides important collections at Felbrigg in Norfolk and work by James Gibbs at Wimpole, both in the care of the National Trust. Other large flat materials, often rolled or folded in the past, include engineering drawings such as the Neath Abbey ironworks engineering plans in West Glamorgan and 19th-century ship plans at Glasgow. Estate papers, often voluminous, can include large plans. All require careful arrangements for their future storage and display, while the cheap paper used for much material, such as the advertisements at the National Fairground and Circus Archive at Sheffield, adds its own challenges.

There is no end to the subject matter. Grants have been given for music, at Christ Church in Oxford, Peterhouse in Cambridge, Handel manuscripts in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Queen's University Belfast and York Minster. Of religious archives, some of those at

Lambeth have already been mentioned. The East London Mosque, the Scottish Catholic Archives and ecclesiastical papers in Armagh have figured along with cathedral estate papers and parish records in all their variety. The Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick holds the very extensive papers of the National Union of Miners, and the Richard Burton Archive at Swansea holds those relating to the South Wales Miners' Federation. Railway records have been conserved for the Festiniog Railway and for Rhyl. Among individuals, major names such as the Brontës (Haworth), Disraeli (Hughenden) and J. M. Keynes (King's College, Cambridge) mingle with some that are unfamiliar or hitherto unknown. In all this, it must be remembered that while some documents are created as matters of record, to be kept, others have survived almost by accident. To the historian, the circumstances of the creation of any record is an integral part of what can be learned from it. Casual correspondence, just as much as ledgers of record, requires continuing care. In 2007, the Trust made an exceptional grant to the Fitzwilliam Museum for the conservation of literary and artistic archives. Thanks to the Trustees' generosity, the Fitzwilliam was able to employ a full-time conservator for four years, dedicated to the most seriously neglected material in the collections. The Museum summed up matters thus:

This remarkably far-sighted investment has also enabled the Museum to establish book conservation posts on a more secure footing, creating the right context for research projects, workshop refurbishment, and acquisitions. Manuscript and book conservation is now embedded not only in Collections Care, but also in the research and exhibitions culture of the Museum.

In terms of research, the conservation of papers of the artist John Flaxman (1755–1826), has allowed their inclusion in our British Academy-funded digitisation of papers relating to William Hayley (1745–1820). Work on the autograph manuscript of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* has facilitated access for students and scholars and paved the way for the Fitzwilliam's acquisition of his annotated proofs of the text in 2008. Conservation of the letters of Charlotte Brontë and the poems of A. E. Housman have made formerly fragile documents fit for display in our most prominent gallery spaces.

The NMCT's unprecedented support completely transformed

the Fitzwilliam's capacity for the conservation of illuminated manuscripts, rare books, music, literary autographs and archives. Crucial to establishing a sustainable book conservation team at the Fitzwilliam, the support had its most visible impact in the groundbreaking exhibition celebrating the Museum's bicentenary: *COLOUR: The Art and Science of Illuminated Manuscripts*, where manuscript conservation was the meeting point for art history and science.

Overall, since 1990 the NMCT has supported over 470 projects with grants totalling over £3.7 million, and the total cost of the projects supported is over £7.3 million. From the first, the format for applications has deliberately been kept as simple as possible. In essence, the description of proposed work requires no more than would be necessary in preparing for any conservation job, whether a medieval manuscript where account has to be taken of possibly original materials or binding structures, or a large archive of 20th-century papers. Estimates of what time, staff, special skills, materials or other resources will be required should simply be part of routine responsible collection management. As in all conservation work, be it buildings, paintings or manuscripts, first estimates are obviously always subject to some flexibility, for one never knows what may emerge in the course of a project; but that does not preclude considered planning.

Recent events have brought further reminders of how much needs to be done. During the lockdowns, storage conditions could not be monitored, and some collections suffered as a result. While the lockdowns provided time to consider and plan, as people returned to work, priorities were changed sometimes (it is to be hoped) temporarily, sometimes apparently long-term. Funds to maintain manuscripts and archives and make them available have been under even greater stress as income has dropped. Nearly everywhere, Covid has brought staff shortages. In many places, it will also take time to re-energise volunteer groups. Recent political, economic and social events have combined not just to change priorities, but also to bring financial, social and professional stress.

Yet demands on the NMCT continue, and they can be expected to rise further as daily work patterns are re-established. Some kinds

of materials need attention because of constant public interest. Some are being discovered. Fresh demands are made by people inquisitive to explore all kinds of history, not least in manuscripts and archives that may have been neglected or whose interest had not been realised. The NMCT's contribution to work on the more obvious names in literature has included the Brontës, Wordsworth, Dickens, Hardy, Thomas Barnes of Dorset, Edward Thomas and members of the Bloomsbury Group. In medieval manuscripts its work extends at least to the 9th century, and for Greek papyri much earlier again. At the Trust's most recent meeting, grants included scientific papers in Edinburgh and Oxford, for papers of William Burges at Cardiff Castle, and various groups of architectural papers. Besides such familiar demands, recognised for many years, is an emergent multitude of topics and kinds of archives, many from the 20th century, clamouring for attention. Ever since its foundation, the NMCT has engaged with manuscripts in all their variety, be they literary, political, commercial, social, or works of art. One key question is whether they are of public interest, or have the potential to be so. Whether concerning nascent as well as long-established political movements, the development of commerce and industry, or the recognition of the history of slavery and colonialism as core parts of the world's history, the need endures: to consult the material records of the past in order to understand our world today, and to pass on this memory to the future.

Unavoidably, more funds are needed. Just as applicants have seen their resources reduced, so too the NMCT has been affected by current financial uncertainty. Many companies have suspended dividend payments, on which much of the Trust's income depends. Dividend income in 2021 was less than two thirds what it had been in 2017. Thanks not least to generous donations, grants have continued more evenly, though the reduction in work during the lockdowns helped to ease a complicated situation. Now, as the pace recovers, and curators return to face their collections, the need to increase the endowment, and the need for donations, whether restricted or not, is all the greater. When the NMCT was founded, the Historical Manuscripts Commission reminded itself of the 'limitless needs and costs of conservation'. They need constant investment.

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Anyone wishing to know more, to apply for a grant, or to contribute financially, should get in touch with Nell Hoare at the NMCT, info@nmct.co.uk or at P.O. Box 4291, Reading, Berkshire, RG8 9JA.

The current trustees, with experience in conservation, finance, librarianship and records management, are Professor David McKitterick (Chairman, who succeeded Lord Egremont in 2018), Mr Charles Sebag-Montefiore (Treasurer), Ms Caroline Checkley-Scott, Dr Norman James and Mrs Caroline Taylor. The patron is Sir Keith Thomas.



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